



Manly on the Plaid

MARTHA BURGESS

The image features a minimalist abstract design. A large, light pink rectangular area occupies the left and top-left portions of the frame. A bright yellow horizontal bar runs across the top. The right side of the image is dominated by a large, vibrant cyan rectangular area. In the bottom-right corner of this cyan area, there is white text. A thin, darker blue horizontal bar is positioned just above the bottom edge of the cyan area.

9 November - 17 December 2000
Rice University Art Gallery

Manly on the Plaid

One night, during her site visit in July 2000, Martha Burgess had a dream in which Audrey Hepburn sang "The Rain in Spain" from *My Fair Lady*. In Martha's dream, however, the rain fell not "mainly on the plain," but *manly on the plaid*. This curious alteration inspired the title and structure of Burgess's Rice Gallery exhibition. Plaid became the exhibition's primary element of visual organization, as bold stripes crisscrossed the gallery walls, creating an enormous three-dimensional plaid environment — a still life viewers could enter. It also became an apt metaphor for Burgess's ability to interweave subjects ranging from linguistics to art history, Chinese history, Feminist and Queer studies, and popular culture into a unified and poetic whole. Drawing from these topics and her own "personal gleanings and diverse meanderings," Burgess made *Manly on the Plaid* a dazzling exploration intellectually and aesthetically, of gender differences in spoken and visual language.

Manly on the Plaid represented the culmination of *Ignatz' Nose Travels in Still Life*, a multi-media project including a CD-ROM of the same title, which Burgess has worked on for three years. The reference to Ignatz pays homage to renowned cartoonist George Herriman, whose comic strip *Krazy Kat* is a favorite of Burgess's. Herriman, like Burgess, played with gender conventions in his work, merging whimsical humor and serious social commentary. The ongoing plot involves Krazy Kat's unrelenting pursuit of Ignatz mouse who resists Krazy's advances by pelting him with bricks. Of interest to Burgess, as well as to many who have written about the *Krazy Kat* cartoon, is Herriman's refusal to assign Krazy Kat a gender. Though the American public thought of the cat as female, in the comic strip Krazy was alternately "he" and "she." Burgess's fascination with gender — how certain objects are assumed to be appropriate for girls and others for boys, how language shapes our perception of gender, as well as her belief in the genderless mind — is at the heart of much of her work.

Kimberly Davenport
Director





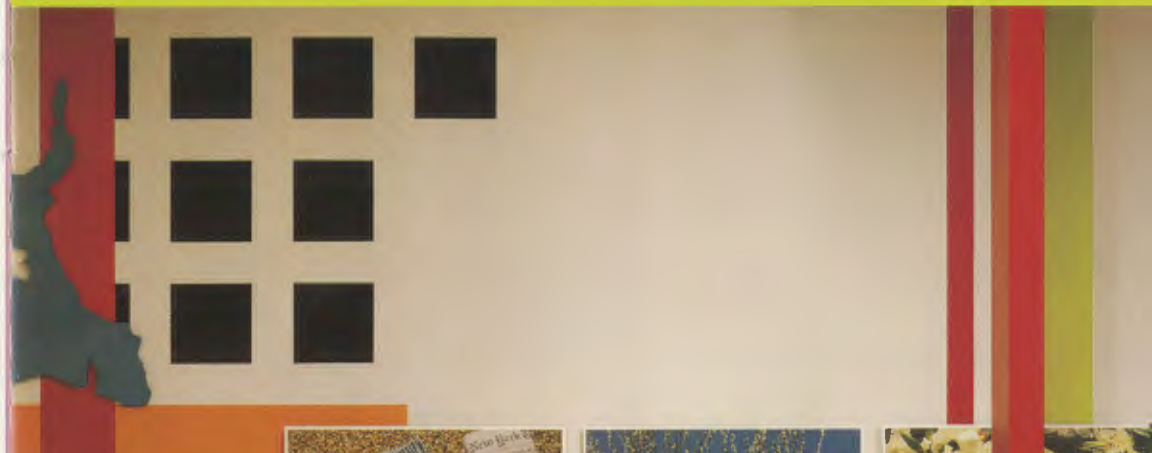
Excerpts from a Conversation
Martha Burgess and Kimberly Davenport
November 2000

Kimberly Davenport: Your background is in sculpture. How does this training affect how you think of your work as it moves from three-dimensional space to the virtual space of the computer, and back again?

Martha Burgess: It never leaves the three-dimensional space as far as I'm concerned; 3-D is that space/time contingency that we are all participating in. For me, anything flat is like a map or diagram. I think of the prints, and any of the objects that result from my interactions with the computer, as souvenirs. So I think of the gallery, really, as a souvenir shop and the Iris prints and anything that is a tangible object in the gallery, as a memento of the travels through the CD. The computer is really central to the work; I use it to reconsider objects as visual speech acts.

What's the process of creating the still lifes?

I make boxes for each of the still lifes and throw objects that sort of belong together in the same box as I find them. I try to find objects that I look at in a somewhat different way in comparison to other people, objects that have more of a rarified meaning. If I look at an object and you look at the object, we each bring a certain range of associations with us. What I'm interested in is the amount we have in common, and the amount we have not in common, in how, just as I bring my own stories and experiences to the objects in the still lifes, other people do, too. When the objects seem to start having enough in common for me to make a still life from them, I arrange them on a table, then climb up a ladder and use a 4x5 camera to take a shot. Then I put that transparency on a drum scanner and create a digital file that's around 300 megabytes to work from. I retouch the file and from that file make the high-resolution Iris prints that hang on the gallery



walls. Once a still life is scanned, I also reduce its file size, so that it's suitable for interactive play on the monitor. I use various software programs to rework the images and to make them interactive, so that when the mouse passes over them you can travel through the CD. And from there, to create the installation, I take the space as it exists on the computer and turn it into something that exists in reality. So the objective within an installation is to take the false space that is on the computer and contextualize it, as if the viewer is walking through the interior space of the computer, or through someone's mind.

In many instances the logic behind the grouping of the objects is not easily discernable. How do you decide to put objects together?

I'm interested in creating a visual discourse in the still lifes that parallels a verbal discourse. Putting two objects next to each other inevitably provokes us to look for a relationship between them; their proximity causes them to form a sentence. In the still lifes, I look for





interesting objects that carry numerous associations with them, and place them together in ways that make sense to me. Then, I use the computer to investigate the various associations and meanings that the objects have, so that after travelling through the CD, one may find that the objects carry different meanings than they did before.

For example, the *Golden Orchid* piece. When I glance at it without remembering — if that's possible — and I see the syringe, I think of needle use, and I immediately think of the AIDS epidemic. But on the CD, when you click on the syringe, you are surprised to be taken to a story that was in the news about 8 or 9 years ago, about two women who tried to kill themselves by injecting themselves with Lysol. They were lovers, workers who had met in a factory, but then one of them decided to marry a man (historically, not an uncommon financial decision for "pragmatic" lesbian couples). Shortly before the wedding the two women met and decided that they couldn't go through with it, so they injected the Lysol with the intent to kill themselves; one woman died. When you click on the orchid you find out that about 100 years ago in Canton, China, women were allowed to marry one another, inherit property and have children. At that time economic conditions favored it: women were working in factories; there was an abundance of women. I thought it was interesting to juxtapose those two different times in history. So when you go back to the picture, after clicking on each of the images, the objects have different meanings to you, and their relationship to each other makes a little more sense.

Are the still lifes in any specific order on the CD? Are they connected to each other in any way?

No, no order, but they are all connected to the first "page" of the CD, the Table of Contents, which shows one representative icon from each of the fourteen still lifes. The icons are scattered across the first page like charms. I like the idea of taking a bag of charms and tossing them across the screen. When you click on this Table of Contents or Home page you get a silhouette version of the charms. When you use the



mouse to roll over a charm, it is activated just like a word would be in hypertext. If you click on it, you are taken to the still life that the charm is taken from. In a couple of places, still lifes are connected to each other through "tunnels." The tunnel functions in a way that parallels walking from one environment into another. By clicking on various things you go through a chain of associations that eventually takes you to another still life altogether. It's kind of like walking through two different environments, and observing how the range of associations that are assigned to an object, or those it acquires when you participate with it, change when you move from one circumstance to another. So if you are collecting the meanings of objects from one environment, your memory records that. Then you apply some of the meanings of the old environment in the new.

The title of the CD is *Ignatz' Nose Travels in Still Life*. Does Ignatz appear in the CD? How?

I like to think of the mouse as being the disruptive factor in the CD. In George Herriman's cartoon strip Ignatz mouse throws bricks at Krazy Kat to resist his advances. To me, the act of throwing a brick is a kind of disruptive act, which I think is something that is appealing to a lot of artists. There is also the parallel with the computer mouse, and the idea of being lead around by your nose through the CD.

The specific reference to Ignatz' nose is a more personal reference, but it ties in conceptually to the CD's subject matter. When I was young, I was really fascinated with Ignatz Mouse's nose. I kept finding things that were like Ignatz' nose, and sharing the allure with other people, saying, "Don't you just love little knobs and the tips of things?" As I grew older, it dawned on me that those tips and Ignatz nose associations were most like a nipple on a breast. At around thirteen, when I was consciously piecing together my sexuality, I was shocked to see this, and to realize that I'd been "outing" myself over Ignatz' nose.





When I was six
I had an out of body experience



and i loved her for it.



I'm interested in this activity of re-encoding things.

At the heart of this whole piece is an attempt to look at objects either from a female perspective or a queer perspective, to reclaim the phallus, to recreate language.

One of the compelling aspects of your work is the way whimsical, sometimes silly components are juxtaposed in a way that creates serious social commentary.

A lot of the still lifes do contain jokes as well as serious passages. I like to find paths, often through plays on words, which move from seriousness to silliness and back to seriousness. In the bra piece (*Implants*, 1999), for example, I included lemons, referring to breast implants, like cars that are "lemons." When you click on the lemon you get the mammogram. On the mammogram you can click on various breast-related problems, such as micro-calcifications. You also see a lump. You can either click to have it removed with a syringe, or if you click the surgery option, a cleaver slices down across the screen. I was thinking of a play on the words *cleaver/clever*, and *cleavage*. Cleavage is a term in biology that refers to cells that keep dividing; cancer. So I have these Cleavage Beavers that come on, and the cleaver keeps chopping them up, making more beavers. At the end there are twelve of them; I think of them as my calendar girls.

Also in the *Golden Orchid* still life, there are two mangos in a Yin Yang formation. If you click on the mango it takes you to a joke, a product I made up called *Mango Spray*. It's funny that "mango" is actually mango. If I were to have a commercial here, it would be a woman saying, "Why *wish* him away when there's Mango Spray?" You occasionally hear that lesbians are man-haters. It just never made sense to me, so I thought about making this product. "For straight women, too! Tired of those pesky odors? Why wish him away when there's Mango Spray?"

There is another section of the CD that links to various real TV commercials. Where did you get the ads? What drew you to them?

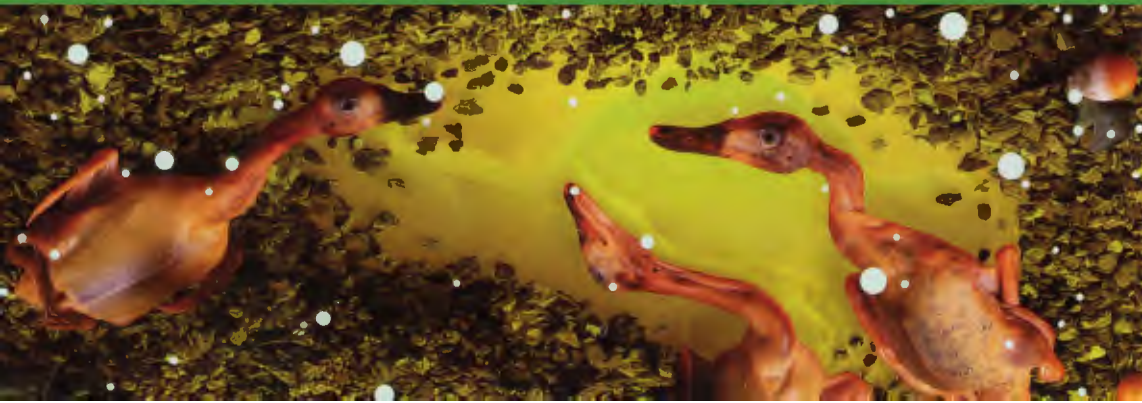
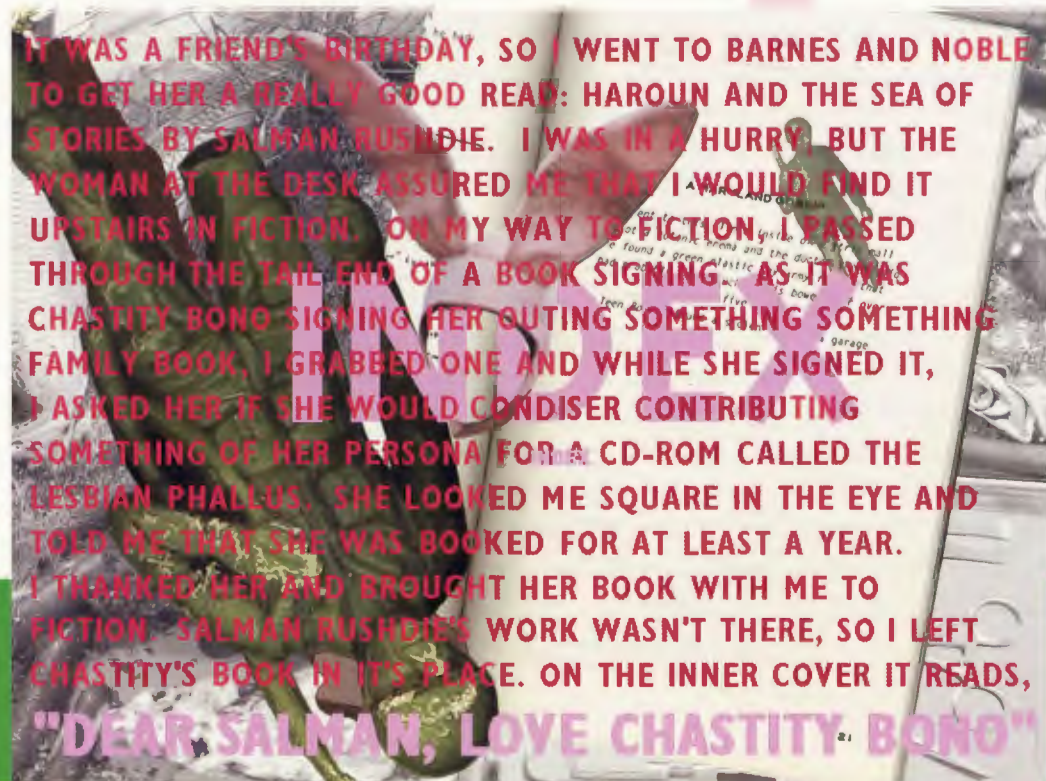
That particular still life is called *Shrinking Violet*. I was thinking of ultra violet, the color in the spectrum that you can't see. I've always thought that the "shrinking violet" isn't the wallflower; it's the lesbian throughout history who didn't really *want* to attract men, and that's why she was considered a shrinking violet. When you click on different objects in this still life, you can access any number of ads. I collect ads that have either overt, or not-so-clear queer readings to them. I get



stencally we don't speak all



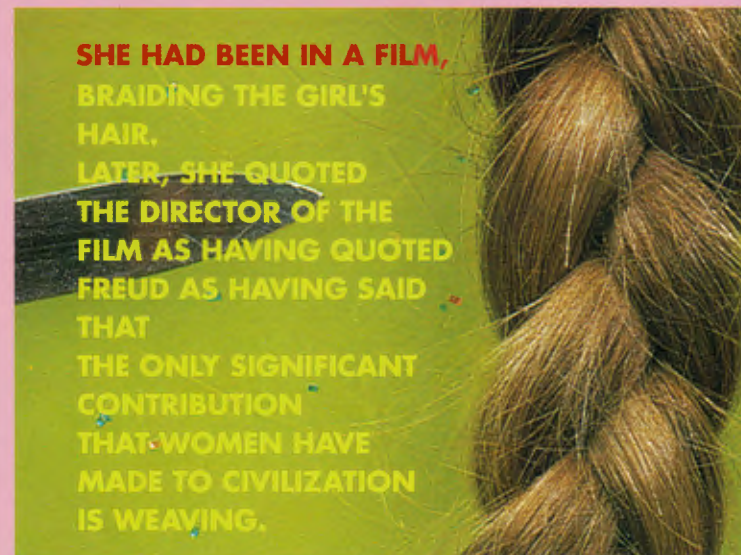
when i was six
i had an out of body experience



all the ads off TV at home. I'll sit for hours surfing through ads. In some cases the advertisers have gone to extreme measures to counter any queer readings. For example, on the CD there is a romantic Volvo ad depicting two women walking along the beach. When this ad aired in Sweden, there was no voiceover explaining that they were sisters. In our culture they *have* to be sisters — we wouldn't want to *confuse* anyone!

What do you hope that people will take away from *Manly on the Plaid*?

I've chosen to deal with lesbian sexuality and gender differences in this project, which stems from a desire to disclose the way a group of people think differently, feel differently, live differently, and the importance of embracing that difference. I think that, if we rely on our families to remember us, lesbian, gay, and trans-people are just erased. You find photographs at garage sales, discarded fragments of hidden histories strewn about here and there. We have to rely on ourselves, or we never ever have a history. It's something that troubles me to the core. It was important to me that I address this topic — the voice of the castaway, the language of the "other" — from personal gleanings and diverse meanderings. I wanted this voice to speak up in the forefront of my new media work. It made sense to me, in my efforts to unearth a visual language by means of speech acts held within objects, to reference not only the still life genre, but also a rich "queer" codifying tradition — often held under the table. It isn't, after all, the overall topic of my work, but it is the name of the game in *Ignatz' Nose*.



"I think Freud was trying to trash women by saying that their only significant contribution to society was weaving, but if you think about it, it's quite a significant thing — especially in terms of thinking."



CHINA — Two Lesbian lovers agreed to commit suicide after arguing over whether or not one should enter a heterosexual marriage.

According to United Press International on Dec.

5, the *Shanghai Evening News* reported that the two women became lovers years ago after meeting each other while working for the same company in Suihua, a city in the northern Heilongjiang

The younger of the two women, who were both in their early 20s, decided to enter a heterosexual marriage while the other vehemently opposed the idea.

The two agreed to commit suicide by injecting

each other with lethal doses of Lysol, a disinfectant. One woman died and the other remains in critical condition.

The UPI report stated that Chinese newspapers rarely cover homosexual-

ity which is considered taboo, but tabloids in China's large southern boom cities, like Shanghai, "are offering readers a steamier fare of gossip, romance, and crimes of passion."

UPI Photo, Dec. 1995



Song of Solomon 2000 (Page 8)

Burgess's fascination with the Old Testament and its enormous effect on contemporary culture, language, and thought inspired her to use the biblical "Song of Solomon" as a "recipe" for this still life. Every element, including gold, frankincense, myrrh, almonds, apples, figs and lilies of the valley, can be found in the text. The cow tongue references verse 4:11, "Your lips distil nectar, my bride; honey and milk are under your tongue . . ." Here, Burgess represents the bride's tongue as literally removed from her mouth, alluding to the work of many feminist scholars who argue that language is gendered in a manner that effectively silences women.

Song of Solomon appeared twice in *Manly on the Plaid*, as an Iris print and as a wall-size banner. Burgess chose this still life as the signature image for the Rice installation because it incorporates her interest in text and spoken language, subjects she thought would be particularly relevant for a university setting.

Lesbian Rule 2000, latex paint (Page 11)

Painted in blue on the left wall of the gallery, the stepped, breast-shaped pattern was inspired by an ancient architectural measuring device traditionally called a "Lesbian Rule." The tool, still in use and now commonly referred to as a "contour gauge," consists of a moveable set of slats that when pressed against a surface, take on its shape.

Broken Tongues 2000, acrylic plastic and latex paint (Page 11)

This wall sculpture recalls Burgess's childhood frustration at being told that the pronoun "he" referred to both males and females. Here Burgess added the letter "s" to the word "he" and "laughter," demonstrating how a small change can radically alter a word's meaning.

Singer 1999, Iris print (Page 11)

Medical teaching models that depict various stages of cervical dilation appear in the foreground of this work while a sonogram is visible in the background. In the CD link, the vaginas open, close, and sing.

Narcissus 1999, Iris print (Page 18)

This still life is based on Freud's theory that lesbians are women who suffer from the Narcissus Complex. Objects including mirrors, make-up, and narcissus flowers, allude to the theme. In the installation, several rubber squid hung in front of this work, and *Incredible Suckers*, a public television documentary about squid ran continuously in the gallery. Burgess chose to incorporate the squid after learning that they communicate by changing color, making them an apt symbol for the exhibition's exploration of the possibility of a visual language.



Bluefoot Snow 2000, pigment photograph (Page 20)

On the CD, *Bluefoot Snow* is a link reached from the still life *Dental Dam*. The image was inspired by a poem Burgess wrote while in graduate school:

I know it snowed/And the cold cars passed/To eat a worn, warm home-cooked meal/(that feeling)/just to ask, many same time, blue foot on the ground,/how old?/Grandmother's hands are shortbread/To time, turn in on the nonsense/And eyes you lets be frank/(difficult)/many same blue foot snow

DERRI four 2000, Epson prints (Page 21)

This image, repeated four times in the installation, refers to a ploy Burgess uses at book signings, where she asks the author to inscribe her/his book to "another artist" to see what s/he will write to a peer.

Golden Orchid 1999, Iris print (Page 24)

See Martha Burgess's comments on Pages 9 and 17.



Shrinking Violet 1999, Iris print (Page 26)

See Martha Burgess's comments on Page 17.

Baster/Bastard 1999, Iris print (Page 27, top)

This still life is a humorous allusion to a method some lesbians have used to become pregnant, through the creative use of a familiar kitchen tool.

Butch's Bureau 1999, Iris print (Page 27, center)

Citing the historical tradition of cross-gender role playing among upper-class women, this image presents items used by a woman to dress up as a man, including bandages to bind her breasts. Burgess links this image to another still life, *Shrinking Violet*, by posing the possibility that the calling card left in *Shrinking Violet* might be from the woman who dressed at *Butch's Bureau*.



Boxers 1999, Iris print (Page 27, bottom)

The film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was the original inspiration for this still life, which features a pair of striped boxer shorts, a folded copy of *The New York Times* with a photo of a soldier, and a plate on which

rests a giant sea clam garnished with an orange slice. On the CD, clicking on the soldier produces an arc of urine which leads to the orange slice. The orange slice becomes a Pac-Man symbol that eats away the still life, leaving a quote about the castration complex.

After Lorena Bobbitt 1999, Iris print (Page 28, top)

Lorena Bobbitt gained notoriety for lopping off her husband's penis and throwing it into a field. Rescue teams searched the field to find the penis so surgeons might reattach it. Burgess created this still life, which includes a moss-covered boot, a surgical tray, and various phallic objects, with this story in mind. She was interested in the story, in particular, because of the gendered split she noticed in people's responses to it.

Dental Dam 1999, Iris print (Page 28, center)

Burgess sometimes makes up her own products, such as the "Mango Spray" related to the *Golden Orchid* still life. Here, Burgess stages a photo shoot for the imaginary product "Dead Duck Dam." This image is linked to *Bluefoot Snow* on the CD.

Tenderiz'er 1999, Iris print (Page 28, bottom)

This work, begun after the verdict in the O.J. Simpson trial was announced, reflects Burgess's thoughts on how forms of institutionalized oppression have limited the advancement of minority groups throughout history. The meat tenderizer serves as a threatening stand-in for a judge's gavel — one capable of upholding a ruling through physical force. The addition of an apostrophe to the work's title emphasizes this by turning the word "tenderizer" into a contraction — tenderize her. On the CD, links from this image open up audio clips of chants from gay rights protests.



I stew for you, Eileen Wuornos 1999, Iris print (Page 29, top)
Eileen Wuornos was a prostitute who worked along one of Florida's most dangerous stretches of highway. For self-defense she carried a small gun referred to as a "woman's gun," which she used to kill nine men in the early 1990s. At her trial, the prosecution argued that Wuornos was a lesbian, therefore a man-hater, who committed the crimes not out of self-defense, but out of maliciousness. In the still life there are nine olives on the plate of take-out food, symbolizing Wuornos' nine victims.

DeSire 1999, Iris print (Page 29, second from top)

DeSire is a playful look at the word "desire" and the compound "de-sire." On the CD, clicking on the dildo opens up a video clip of what appears to be a male body with a woman's breasts. As s/he dances, a succession of phallic symbols — a turkey baster, a syringe, a cigar — all extracted from other parts of the CD, flash in succession over the figure's genital area. Burgess constructed this sequence after learning from author and gender-theorist Kate Bornstein that, while four female clues are necessary for a person to "read" a figure as female, only one, — the penis — is necessary for the figure to be read as male. In her book, *Gender Outlaw*, Bornstein writes, "In this culture, gender attribution, like gender assignment, is phallogocentric. That is, one is male until perceived otherwise." Burgess tests this theory in reverse by depicting a figure with only one female signifier.

Implants 1999, Iris print (Page 29, third from top)

See Martha Burgess's comments on Page 17.

Sugar N' 1999, Iris print (Page 29, bottom)

The nursery rhyme "What are little girls and little boys made of?" provided the "recipe" for this still life, which depicts sugar and spice for girls, and snips, snails and pigs' tails (substitutes for puppy dogs' tails) for boys. On the CD the objects' links explore the construction of gender. Clicking on the petri dish, for example, causes the snails (which are known to be hermaphrodites) to reproduce, while a voice-over tells the viewer that the Hungarian language has only one word for both "he" and "she."



About the Artist

Martha Burgess received an MFA from Yale University in 1982. She has lived in New York since 1984, and has exhibited at numerous New York venues including Gary Tatintzian Gallery where she had a solo exhibition in 2000. Burgess is the recipient of numerous grants and fellowships from organizations including the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Jerome Foundation, and the Center for New Media at Parsons School of Design. She was selected as a 2001 Fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation in the category of New Media.

Manly on the Plaid, 2000
Courtesy of the artist
www.marthaburgess.com

Rice Art Gallery is located in Sewall Hall on the Rice University campus, 6100 Main Street, Houston, Texas 77005, and on the Web at www.rice.edu/ruag

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Page 2 *Krazy Kat*, September 8, 1940, reprinted with special permission of King Features Syndicate; **Page 4** Still from *Ignatz' Nose Travels In Still Life* CD-ROM © 2000 Martha Burgess; **Pages 6, 7** Installation details, photos: björg © 2000; **Page 8** *Song of Solomon*, Still from *Ignatz' Nose Travels In Still Life*; **Pages 10, 11, 13, 18, 19** Installation details, photos: björg, © 2000; **Pages 14,15** Installation view, photo: Hickey/Robertson, © 2000 Rice University Art Gallery. The following are images or details from *Ignatz' Nose Travels In Still Life*: **Page 16** Detail; **Page 20** *Bluefoot Snow*; **Page 21** *Derri four*; **Page 23** Detail; **Page 24** *Golden Orchid*; **Page 25** Details; **Page 27** (top to bottom) *Baster/Bastard*, *Butch's Bureau*, *Boxers*; **Page 28** (top to bottom) *After Lorena Bobbitt*, *Dental Dam*, *Tenderiz'er*; **Page 29** (top to bottom) *I stew for you*, *Eileen Wuornos*; *DeSire*, *Implants*, *Sugar N'*; **Page 30** *Shrinking Violet*.

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